

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Wilson Eyre
1858-1944

Wilson Eyre was one of the leaders of his generation of Philadelphia eclectics, and his work is closely aligned with a group of talented designers, including Frank Miles Day, Walter Cope, and John Stewardson, whose creative work established the notion of a uniquely Philadelphia style in the minds of the writers for the national architectural press. Eyre, who secured his reputation through the success of his domestic designs, received the larger number of his commissions in Philadelphia and nearby regions. The prominence of these led to his being engaged by patrons in other parts of the country who caused important designs by him to be erected in Michigan, Ohio, and Louisiana, as well as throughout the Mid-Atlantic and Northeastern seaboard.

Born in Florence in 1858 to a consular official from Philadelphia, Wilson Eyre was brought by his parents to that city while still young. It was there in 1877, after a year of study at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, that Eyre entered the office of James Peacock Sims (1849-1882). In 1882 they formed a partnership; but Sims died suddenly that year, and Eyre took over the practice. Except for an informal connection during the 1880s with William E. Jackson, who had also

been employed in the Sims office, Eyre practiced alone until 1911 when he established a partnership with John Gilbert McIlvaine (1880-1939), though most designing remained Eyre's responsibility. From the start of his independent career, Eyre's work was exhibited and published widely throughout America, and for some forty years his designs were held in high esteem by architects, critics, and patrons.

Maine was the source of six commissions for Eyre, all but one of which were built and four of which are extant today. Designed between 1888 and 1918 and representing both public and private commissions, they span his productive career and represent in microcosm a summary of his stylistic development and architectural concerns. Like that of many of his contemporaries, his work here was intended primarily for summer use.

Eyre's first Maine commission came to him in 1888 when he produced a design for a casino for the Kebo Valley Club in Bar Harbor (Figure 1). Although it is not clear exactly how he was selected, a number of Philadelphians, including one of the major developers, DeGrasse Fox, were active in the club's affairs, and their familiarity with his work may well have led to his being chosen. Although Eyre had established his private practice in Philadelphia only six years previously in 1882, by 1888 he was already well on his way to achieving a national reputation; and in the same year several important jobs came into his office.

Eyre received relatively few non-domestic commissions, in part because he preferred to handle all important aspects of a project himself; and as he desired to give close personal supervision to each design, his office never employed more than a few draftsmen. The Kebo Club provided him the kind of non-residential commission with which he felt most comfortable. As a private club, it retained a home-like scale at the aesthetic midpoint between a residence and a public structure, with the final result closely resembling a commodious country house similar to the numerous Shingle Style cottages built in Maine and elsewhere throughout the last decades of the 19th century.

The Kebo represented a special plum for the architect as it gave him the opportunity to design a suitable enclosure for the social center of a self-consciously fashionable community. The Club, which took its name from nearby Kebo Mountain, had been founded in 1887 by the Acadia Park Company, a consortium of wealthy men who organized themselves to develop the area

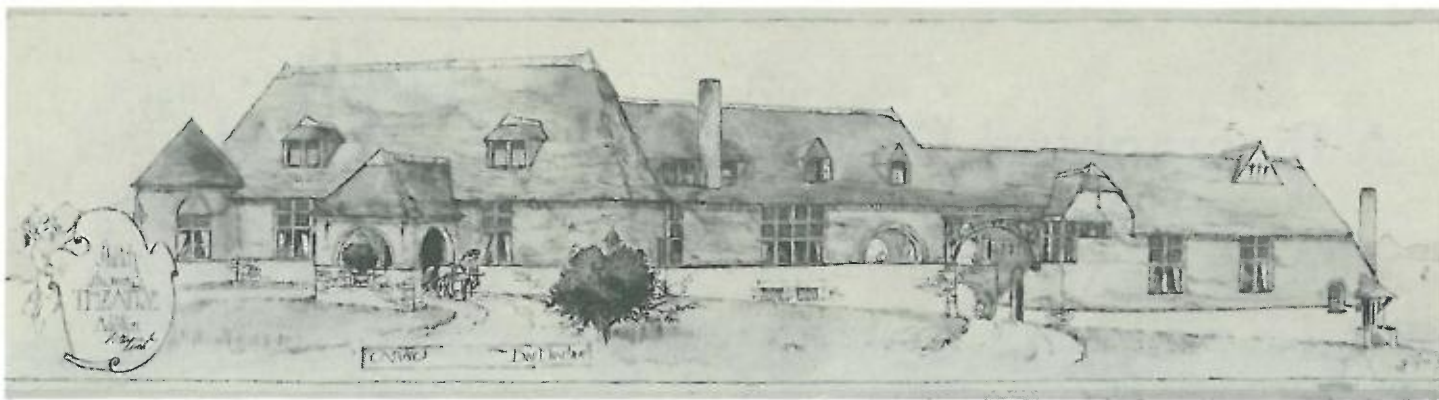


Figure 1. Rendering of the Kebo Valley Club, Bar Harbor, by Wilson Eyre, 1888
(Courtesy of Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania, Will Brown, Photographer).

below Cadillac Mountain. The Company retained ownership of the property and leased facilities to the Club. By February, 1888, plans had been drawn and approved, and the end of the summer season saw the structure on Eagle Lake Road nearly completed. When, a year later, the Club held an "informal opening"¹ on July 18, 1889, everything was in "the most charming completeness and order",² and the Club soon became a "new society rendezvous".³

Eyre's design for the Casino featured a rambling, long and comfortable plan for a picturesquely irregular story-and-a-half cottage set on a stone foundation (Figure 2). Covered with some 260,000 shingles, the building was topped by a rough finished and stained roof whose surface was pierced by dormer windows. Measuring about 230 by 50 feet, it was one of the largest structures to have been erected to date in Bar Harbor. Guests drove up under the stone port cochere which marked the main entrance, and on the other side, a broad piazza ran the full length of the main building.

Built at a cost of approximately \$20,000, the clubhouse featured both ample service quarters and a suite of public rooms, described as being "elegant and in perfect taste".⁴ These were equipped with cozy nooks and generous fireplaces, some with alcoves at the side, and were finished with a sophisticated simplicity ap-

propriate to vacation life. The library, painted in a pale blue, contained a Colonial Revival fireplace. Above some of the fireplaces Eyre placed "dainty bits of carving",⁵ characteristic of his restrained use of applied decoration which he skillfully employed to provide an aesthetic focus for each room. The exposed ceiling beams of the reception room contrasted with the peacock blue and salmon pink paint on the walls, all set off by "an artistic flower design".⁶ Sage green with deep red accents around the fireplace were the colors chosen for the dining room, and the billiard room was finished in a warm terracotta.

A special feature, an appropriate accommodation for the love of nineteenth century amateurs for amateur performances and musicals, was a "large and fully equipped theatre",⁷ commodious enough to seat five to six hundred persons. When the chairs were removed, the theatre doubled as a ball room whose walls were described as being in a "cool shade of gray with a curious effect of plaster work".⁸ It was connected to the main building by a covered walk, whose arch, a distinguishing element of Eyre's buildings of this period, provided a visual link to the main building. The delicate figural carving on the arch, another typical Eyre detail, was a pleasing contrast to the roughness of the rest of the building.

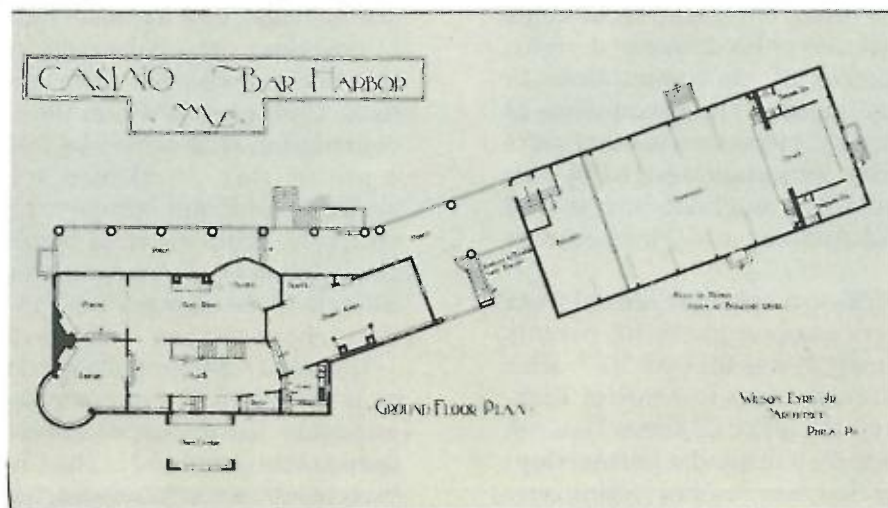


Figure 2. Plan of Kebo Valley Club, Bar Harbor, by Wilson Eyre, *Building*, August 24, 1889
(Courtesy of Boston Public Library).

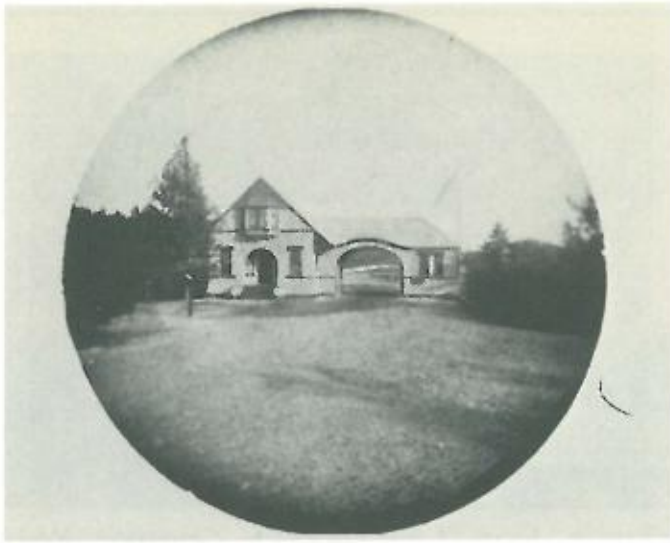


Figure 3. Gate House, Kebo Valley Club, Bar Harbor, c. 1890 view (Courtesy of Bar Harbor Historical Society).

On July 21, 1899, the day the Club had officially opened for the season, a fire broke out at about 8:00 p.m., the cause of which was never satisfactorily determined. As no evening meal had been served that night, no one was present to observe the start of the blaze, which scorched out of control within ten minutes. The efforts of the local fire department, dependent on horse drawn equipment and further hampered by inadequate water connections, were unequal to subduing the flames. Strong winds helped fan the fire quickly throughout the wooden structure, but fortunately the blaze was prevented from spreading to nearby wooded areas and houses. Summer residents soon arrived to

watch the spectacular conflagration, and the local paper noted that "all Bar Harbor was in attendance"⁹ for the Club's "first and last great function of the season".¹⁰

The Club's officials quickly decided to rebuild, though Eyre was not invited to design the replacement. Ground was broken by October of 1899 for a new clubhouse designed by Fred L. Savage (1861-1924), an architect from nearby Northeast Harbor. Settling in Bar Harbor by 1892, Savage soon established himself as one of the island's leading architects. Only Eyre's gatehouse survived the fire (Figure 3), and it was incorporated into the new structure which burned in the destructive fire of October, 1947.

Despite the acknowledged success of the Kebo Club as the scene of Bar Harbor's "greatest social functions"¹¹ and the wide exposure Eyre's design necessarily must have gained for him among those who made the annual migration to Mount Desert, his accomplishment here was apparently never translated into any domestic commissions. Eyre's considerable renown as a country house designer and a skillful practitioner of the popular Shingle Style makes his omission from the lengthy roster of architects of Bar Harbor houses even more surprising.

Eyre designed one other structure intended for Bar Harbor, but his Union or Congregational Church of 1888, one of the architect's few ecclesiastical designs, was never built (Figure 4). Its Anglicized combination of stone and shingles would have made it an attractive complement to the Kebo Club. Intended to replace an earlier structure by an unknown architect dating from 1853, it was an 1888 design by William Ralph Emerson (1833-1917) that was selected by the congregation, a structure which was destroyed by fire in 1942.

Two years later, in 1890, Wilson Eyre received commissions from Philadelphians for a pair of summer houses on Grindstone Neck, a narrow peninsula in



Figure 4. Rendering of Union Church, Bar Harbor, by Wilson Eyre, 1888 (Courtesy of Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Miss Louisa Eyre).



Figure 5. Charles S. Whelen House, Grindstone Neck, Winter Harbor, 1890 view (MHPC).



Figure 6. Laura D. McCrea House, Grindstone Neck, Winter Harbor, c. 1900 view (Courtesy of Mr. & Mrs. James B. Rather, Jr.).

Winter Harbor. The houses formed part of a large speculative development planned by the Gouldsboro Land Improvement Company, incorporated in 1889. Only a portion of the planned dwellings were constructed, and these were clustered around the Grindstone Inn, within easy access of the yacht club and chapel. As the Company wished to establish a "modern and desirable cottage settlement"¹² and sought "only the most desirable class of purchasers",¹³ no public sale of land was made, and only residential construction was permitted. Deeds required that dwellings on the sites were to be completed by July 1, 1891, could not cost less than \$2,000, and could not be sold for at least a year. No plots of less than an acre were sold, and deeds placed further restrictions on potentially undesirable structures.

Charles S. Whelen, a banker and philanthropist who served as one of the directors of the Company and as one of several of its stock agents in Philadelphia, requested a design for a house for him and his wife Mignonette Violett (Figure 5). The Whelens were typical of the type of person who chose to summer on Grindstone. While comfortably well off, they were not in a financial position to commission the sort of socially aspirant piles built on an ever increasing scale in Bar Harbor. The property left the Whelen's ownership in 1897, and the house was altered about 1900, judging by period detail and tax records. The large port cochere, porch, and additional rooms added at this time were likely designed by Eyre as well. Eyre's second house on Grindstone was for Laura D. McCrea, widowed by her husband Charles (Figure 6). Smaller than the nearby Whelen house, it too was covered with shingles and featured a flaring porch to one side. Inside, both houses were quite plain, with few decorative details.

Although Bar Harbor was supplied with convenient transportation via the Maine Central Railroad, as well as by steamer and stage lines, Winter Harbor, five miles directly east over the water, was less convenient to reach and never attracted the numbers of people who

descended upon Mount Desert during the summer months. While this may have been an attractive point to those seeking a quieter summer respite from urban cares and heat, it may have also been the reason that Grindstone never developed as extensively as planned.

Although several other architects designed houses on Grindstone, including William Winthrop Kent (1860?-1955) of New York and the firm of Arthur Stone (1834-1908), Charles E. Carpenter (1844-1923), and Edmund R. Wilson (1856-1906) of Providence, most of the structures on the Neck were planned by Lindley Johnson (1854-1937), another Philadelphian who served on the executive committee of the Company and maintained a summer home there. Eyre would have known Johnson well, for they were among several co-founders of Philadelphia's T Square Club and were both active in the architectural affairs of that city.

Eyre's most modest Maine commission came from William Waldo Blackman, a homeopathic physician from Brooklyn. Eyre's rugged design for a summer house, "Breeze Lodge Cottage", featured handsome views of nearby Sebago Lake and the White Mountains in the distance (Figure 7). The combination of stone on the first story with a strongly arched entranceway and shingled upper stories was employed by Eyre in several other houses, but never so roughly as here.

Blackman had first summered in Sebago in the early 1890s when he stayed at the Douglas Inn, and he decided to purchase the property there a few years later. He came to have considerable real estate holdings in Sebago and by October, 1895 had purchased a three acre property on which he intended to build his own house.¹⁴ Less than a month later plans for a summer house were underway. Located part way up Douglas Hill, the house was one of a group of summer residences constructed during this period. Dr. Blackman, who maintained his practice for over sixty-five years, has long been remembered in Sebago as a generous man who provided free medical care to local residents. At his death, the house passed to his son William

Jackson Blackman, who retained ownership until the early 1970s.

Blackman was married to another physician, Lora Jackson (1855-1923), the sister of William E. Jackson (1857-1930), an architect who established a brief informal partnership with Eyre in the 1880s, but who continued to maintain his professional address at Eyre's office. Jackson designed a house nearby for one of Blackman's patients, Romiett Stevens. Another Brooklynite, Dr. George S. Ogden, who practiced at the same hospital as Blackman, also built a summer house dating from 1897 further up the hill.

Eyre's last commission in Maine came to him in 1918 when Louise Natalie Grace of Great Neck, Long Island, decided to build a large summer house on the 125 acres of Keller Point overlooking the Penobscot Bay's Seal Harbor which she had purchased from the Islesboro Land and Improvement Company (Figure 8). Eyre earlier had produced a design for Miss Grace's home at Great Neck, when in 1910 he enlarged the structure he had originally designed in 1902 for Miss Lucille Alger and a Miss Fuller. On the plan of the Islesboro house, two bedrooms are indicated on the second story, one for Miss Alger and another for Miss Grace.

Although the island of Islesboro, which measures nearly fourteen miles long and eight miles wide, was less isolated than some locations popular with summer residents, it was accessible only by ferry and consequently afforded more privacy than mainland retreats. Miss Grace's house was more secluded than most, for she chose a site on the north end of the island where few houses were erected. Most summer residents preferred to build their homes on the opposite end of the island.

Miss Grace was one of eleven children of William Russell Grace, who served two terms as Mayor of New York City during the 1860s. A wealthy man, he is today best known for his shipping interests and as the founder of the famous Grace Lines. He had a personal connection to Maine, for in 1859 in Tenants Harbor, he married Lillius Gilchrest, the daughter of a Thomaston shipbuilder. This link continues to the present day in the form of the Lillius Gilchrest Grace Institute of Tenants Harbor, which provides education in the domestic sciences to young women.

Miss Grace's Islesboro house was handsomely sited on a point of land, and almost all of the rooms were situated so as to have a view of the water. Several loggias enabled summer visitors to take advantage of the pleasant seasonal weather. The plan featured a central area with a hall, loggias, dining and writing rooms, and service facilities and a large living room laid out on either side (Figure 9). A studio was planned for the upper floor. Miss Grace was an amateur artist whose productions included eleven murals which she exhibited at the New York galleries of the Maison Francaise during December, 1897 and January, 1898.

The largest house Eyre constructed in Maine, the Grace Cottage is in many ways an unusual one for the area, as stucco was not a favored material here. Its



Figure 7. William Waldo Blackman House, Douglas Hill, Sebago, c. 1900 view
(Courtesy of Lora Anderson).

relatively plain exterior and more formal plan were typical of Eyre's later work, in which he abandoned the small scale decoration and picturesque irregularity that had been his trademark in the nineteenth century. Not far from the main house and nearer the water is a small picturesque two-room lodge which likely dates from the same period and was probably also designed by Eyre.

The Grace House, built when Wilson Eyre was sixty years old, came near the end of his productive career. Although he lived to be eighty-six, he received only a few commissions throughout the 1920s and practically none during the 1930s. He remained a Philadelphia resident until his death in 1944.

Betsy Fahlman
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Norfolk, Virginia
September, 1986

NOTES

- ¹ "Kebo Valley Club", *Bar Harbor Record*, July 11, 1889.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ "The Casino, the Handsome Structure at Acadia Park", *B. H. Record*, August 23, 1888.
- ⁴ "News of Bar Harbor", *Mount Desert Herald*, July 26, 1888.
- ⁵ "Kebo Valley Club", *B. H. Record*, July 11, 1889.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ *Portland Daily Press*, February 15, 1888.
- ⁸ "Kebo Valley Club", *B. H. Record*, July 11, 1889.
- ⁹ "Kebo Burned: The Beautiful Clubhouse a Mass of Blackened Ruins", *B. H. Record*, July 5, 1899.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² *Gouldsboro Land Improvement Company's Grindstone Inn and Lands, Winter Harbor, Maine*, brochure, privately printed, 1891, n.p.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Vol. 630, p. 411, October 22, 1895, Cumberland County Registry of Deeds, Portland.
- ¹⁵ "Architects' Notes", *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide*, Vol. 10, No. 47, November 20, 1895, p. 1.
- ¹⁶ Vol. 324, p. 63, February 5, 1918, Waldo County Registry of Deeds, Belfast.

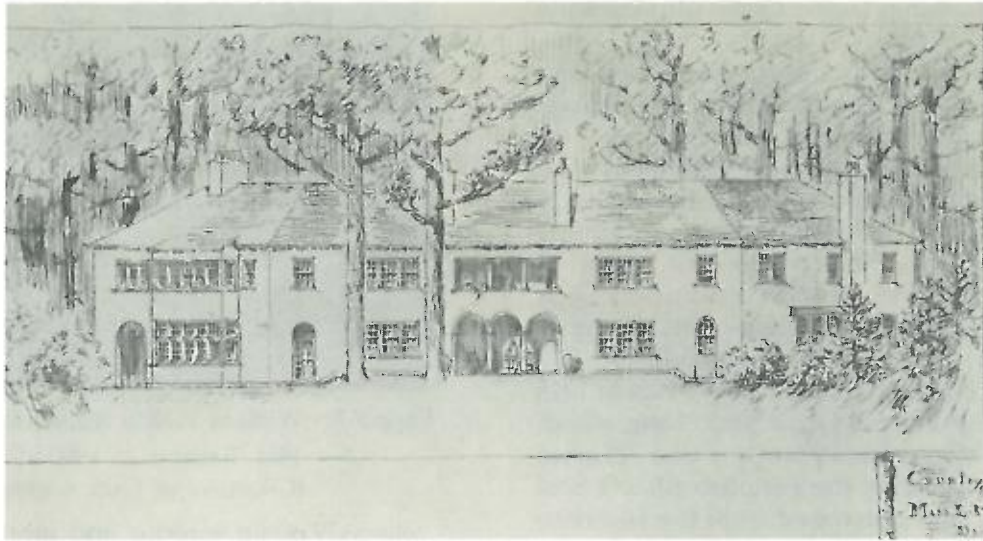


Figure 8. Rendering of Louise Natalie Grace House, Islesboro, by Wilson Eyre, 1918
(Courtesy of Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania, Will Brown, Photographer).

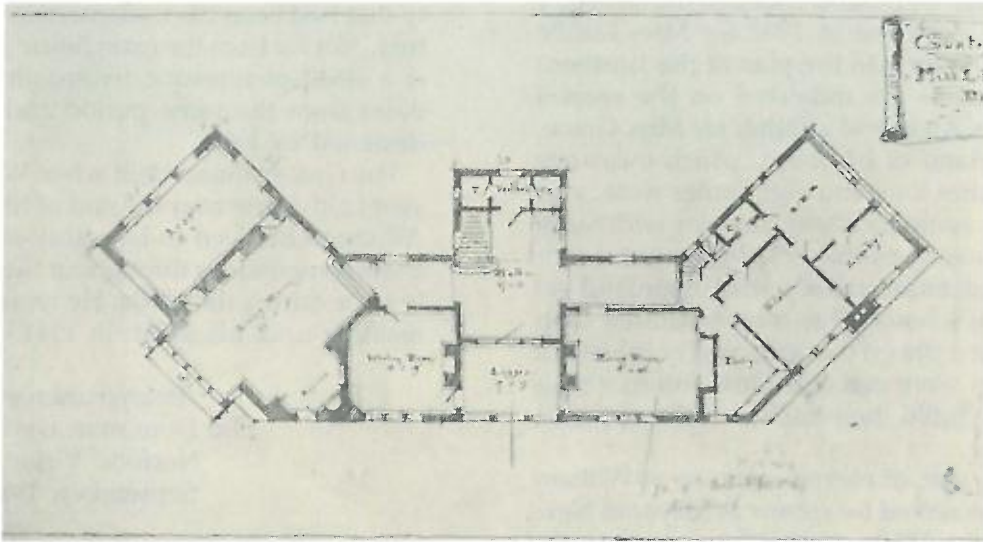


Figure 9. Plan of Louise Natalie Grace House, Islesboro, by Wilson Eyre, 1918
(Courtesy of Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania, Will Brown, Photographer).

List of Known Commissions in Maine by Wilson Eyre

Kebo Valley Club and Casino, Bar Harbor, 1888, Destroyed.
Union Church, Bar Harbor, 1888, Not Executed.
Charles S. Whelen House, Grindstone Neck, Winter Harbor,
1890, Extant.
Laura D. McCrea House, Grindstone Neck, Winter Harbor,
1890, Extant.
Dr. William Waldo Blackman House, Douglas Hill, Sebago,
1895, Altered.
Louise Natalie Grace House, Islesboro, 1918, Extant.

Architectural Drawings

Drawings for the Kebo Valley Club in Bar Harbor and the Louise N. Grace House on Islesboro are in the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. A rendering for the Union Church in Bar Harbor is in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Photograph by Wilson Eyre
Courtesy of the Author

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